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# Vision and Values in Today's Rural Life

Summary of a study conference held at  
Roanridge, Mo., October 19-21, 1954

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**THE CHRISTIAN RURAL FELLOWSHIP**  
**156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.**



## **A Clean Furrow**

*Seed-time, and open fields,  
And slowly plodding team, and cleaving share,  
To lay the earth in furrows, line on line—  
This is my care.*

*For lo, this waiting soil,  
Receptive, and responsive to my will,  
For all the ills of all the ages gone  
Is fertile still.*

*So soft! No roar of arms;  
But gentle crumbling of the mellow earth;  
Yet each sustaining harvest still has here  
Its place of birth.*

*I'll guide my sturdy plow  
And turn the ribboned furrows, line by line;  
For though the world has many things to do,  
This task is mine.*

*And when my day is done  
And evening's glow has settled o'er the scene,  
Returning from the field, I'll leave behind  
A furrow, clean.*

JAMES G. NEEDHAM, 1953  
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## *New Vision and Old Values*

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► In a world where great upheavals are taking place, it is well that we pause to examine our own vision and our values. Nearly half the world has changed socially, economically, and politically since World War II. Countries like China have lost their freedom. Others like India have gained their liberty, but with it a doubtful sense of security. In the great change, so far, vast numbers of peasant people have been rendered homeless. Among the central problems of our time are land, food, and shelter.

In rural America, too, change is coming with greatly accelerated speed and we need to be aware lest we suddenly find ourselves adrift on a sophisticated sea of materialism. The Christian rural movement today must ever seek deep spiritual anchorage and a sense of vision and values adequate to our changing times and widening world responsibility.

It is important, therefore, that we pause to consider the unseen values which help to give rural life a wholesome sense of direction and high purpose. As a first step toward meeting this need, fifteen representatives from branches of the Christian Rural Fellowship met in Roanridge, Mo., October 19-21, 1954, to consider the topic: VISION AND VALUES IN TODAY'S RURAL LIFE.

This meeting was the first step in an emphasis which we trust will continue and be expressed through Christian Rural Fellowship bulletins during the coming years. The conference and the printing of this report have been made possible by a sponsoring grant from the Sears-Roebuck Foundation.

In this same connection, two other groups of leaders in American rural life have met to exchange views and experience. It is hoped that these meetings will stimulate efforts to assay and lift up the unseen forces which help to provide native integrity, spiritual rootage, and faith in God, which are our supreme national assets.

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This booklet represents an effort to summarize briefly the study papers presented and some of the discussions which re-

sulted. More complete documents will follow during the year as special bulletins. We are deeply indebted to Eugene Smathers for his invaluable assistance in editing this report.

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Special credit should also be given to Clifford L. Samuelson, Norman L. Foote, Richard O. Comfort, and William A. Albrecht, who presented study papers to the conference on the subjects in the order that they follow in this report.

Since its founding in 1935, the Christian Rural Fellowship has served "to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life—and to promote a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies."

Membership includes ministers, teachers, agricultural people, missionaries, and others. The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin is supplied to members at a moderate cost.

The Secretary always welcomes statements or manuscripts dealing with Christian rural life.

I. W. MOOMAW, *Secretary,*  
*Christian Rural Fellowship*

## ***Spiritual Resources for Today's Rural Life***

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► Our purpose here is to review and rethink portions of the topic, "Life on the Land and in the Small Town." We shall view this topic from the standpoint of factors in the rural environment which serve as resources for the development of spiritual values. There has been much pseudo-Wordsworthian gush on this subject. There has also been much serious and balanced treatment, which has lifted out the dignity and values of rural living, coupled with a dispassionate analysis and evaluation of the grim, sordid, soul-killing materialistic routine. We may cover this topic under four categories:

1. The Natural Environment—its "Four Kingdoms"
2. The Social and Socializing Factors in Rural Living
3. The Sacramental Concept of Life—and Emergence of the "Fifth Kingdom"
4. The Spiritual Resource which is the Christian Church—and the Nurture of Spiritual Values

### **1. *The Natural Environment***

The greatest single factor which distinguishes rural life from city life is contact with the natural environment. The aspects of this environment which have inherent potential spiritual resources for the rural person are to be found in the four natural "Kingdoms."

#### **The Land—The Mineral Kingdom**

The first of these is the mineral kingdom as revealed in The Land. The rural person cannot but become aware that The Land is more than a mass of chemical compounds. The rural person cannot escape his dependence on The Land. He must deal with the land in accord with its own inherent capacities.

Martin Thornton in *Rural Synthesis*, endeavoring to define the religious basis of rural culture, states concerning Land, "Like human personality, it is made up of a complexity of qualities and characteristics which together form an indivisible and complete unit. For as with personality we may speak of body, mind, instinct, and spirit, so with The Land we can regard its physical, spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic properties."



It is in this concept that The Land is more than material substance; that man's life and all he holds of value are dependent on it—that we find one of the great natural *potential* spiritual values and resources in rural living.

### **The Seed, Germination and Fertility—The Vegetable Kingdom**

The seed, its germination, fertility and growth are among the factors in the natural environment which bring their message of spiritual values to the rural person. That spark of life, emerging from the dry seed when placed in an environment conducive to germination and growth, brings the man face to face with the mystery of the Life Force which—just as Land must be spelled with a capital “L”—so calls for a capital “L” in Life.

### **Birds, Animals and Reproduction—The Animal Kingdom**

In most situations the life of rural people is surrounded by animal life. They witness the amazing capacity of animal life to adapt itself, sustain itself and reproduce itself. In it all is God the Creator and Sustainer of Life.

Also declaring the imminence and transcendence of God in the natural world is the design and character of a feather as an instrument of flight, a bee colony as social organization, a beaver dam as incarnate intelligence.

### **Man—The Human Kingdom**

In this environment of creation, fertility, and growth, man becomes aware of his relationship to the natural world. In the rural setting, the story of Creation becomes true, both as poetry and process. “And the Lord God made man from the dust of the earth, breathing into him the breath of life: and man became a living soul . . .”

Regardless of how insensitive or undeveloped is his feeling for the aesthetic, man cannot fully escape the natural grandeur of the earth and the Universe. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” Mountains and valleys, deserts and rivers, forests and fields, sunrise and sunset—all combine in their own way in their own geographical area to bring out the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness. All combine for a manifestation of the pervading note, “this is greater than man—this is of God!”

As Rudolph Otto so fully propounds in his classic *Sense of The Holy (or Numinous)*, there are circumstances, situations and environments in which man more readily apprehends God's presence. We hold that the rural setting is conducive to providing this most elemental of all spiritual resources for rural people.

Additional spiritual resources for rural life are to be found in the normal social structures in which the people are involved. Foremost among these is the family unit.

## **2. The Rural Family Unit**

There have been uttered many inept shibboleths regarding the domestic felicity of the rural family. Both for parents and children, family life on the farm or in the small town can be marred by discord, tension, cruelty, monotony. It can be the cause of blighted and warped personality development. The truth of this is known by every rural pastor. Yet, granting that the rural locale does not automatically carry with it the ideal of family life, it yet holds true that the natural virtues which evidence sound personality are most readily to be developed in the rural family. It can be stated, without fear of negation based on the numerous sad exceptions, that the rural family itself is one of the great spiritual resources, both for those who share in its bonds, and in its overflow into the life of the nation.

The extension of those same values to be found for the individual in the rural family relationship is to be found for the family itself in the environment of the rural neighborhood and community.

## **3. The Rural Community**

Much is said and written about the "breakdown" of rural neighborhoods and rural communities. Modern communication and transportation have sharply made their impact on rural society. In many places, the close-knit, compact sense of community has been either greatly weakened, or even obliterated. Yet, coupled with those undermining, inevitable economic and social forces has come widespread, reawakened awareness of the importance of neighborhood grouping and small community life. It has been demonstrated to a point of accepted fact that human and social values are gained or lost for the individual, the family and the nation, to the degree that there is an



awareness on the part of the individual of his role in group relationships. This sense of belonging to the whole of society finds its nexus in participating in the ongoing relationships of the local community. Thus the community itself becomes a resource of social and spiritual values to the individual, the family, and the nation.

But it is basically the Christian Church which must bring the quickening of the human spirit to the point of experiencing the true spiritual resources to be found in any of these matters.

#### **4. *The Christian Church in Rural Life***

It is the Christian Church with a sacramental concept of all life which is the basic spiritual resource for rural people. It is in the doctrine of the Incarnation, God made flesh in Christ Jesus, that a full unity is expressed between the physical and the spiritual. To apprehend this unity of the physical and the spiritual is an essential for rural people in order that the natural "Kingdoms" of Creation be perceived as incarnating the spiritual. The tragedy in rural life is that much of what claims to be the Christian religion makes a completely false distinction between the material and the spiritual. "Salvation" is expressed in terms which mean escape from the material. All of creation is to be viewed as a vehicle for God's creative, redeeming, sustaining power. As the natural world is thus viewed, sacramentally, the traditional Trinitarian theology becomes not an ecclesiastical verbal formula, but the expression of the most normal, simple, and greatest truths.

Coupled with the belief in One God, manifesting His power in three expressions, of Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, is the doctrine of the Christian Church as the fellowship of all believers, and the vessel of God's continuing grace expressed through the sacraments.

The service of the Church, then, in her ministry to rural people, is to be that great spiritual resource which enables them to lay hold on the true meaning and experience of the spiritual values within the daily stuff of life with which they are surrounded—their natural world and the world of their fellow men.

## *The Contribution of Rural People to World Peace*

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Come, let us build together;  
We have battled far too long;  
A worthier work should now employ  
The sinews of the strong.  
The wail of the homeless speaks it;  
Gaunt hunger loudly cries,  
And what can further warfare bring  
But added miseries.

No, let us stand together,  
Restore the fertile fields  
In thankfulness that Mother Earth  
Her wonted increase yields;  
That sunshine warms the mellow soil,  
That dews and rains are free;  
That the springs of human sustenance  
Flow on unceasingly.

Shall the sword devour forever?  
Shall vengeance never cease,  
While happiness but waits upon  
The will to be at peace?  
Oh, that the kindlier ways of life  
Might fill the hearts of men  
And flood the earth with industry!  
Come, let us build again!

From *Pax Vobiscum*, by JAMES G. NEEDHAM  
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► The world is growing up almost tragically during these present years and we need to lay hold of every possible resource that will help us to move in the direction of enduring peace.

As custodians of the world's basic natural resources, rural people have a large stake in the peaceful well-being of mankind as a whole. They deal in natural products, the essentials of survival. They are acquainted with thrift and they deplore waste. War, on the contrary, devastates their fields and wastes

the products which to them have sacredness because they are the fruits of toil and of God's creative process.

While agriculture is a competitive industry, each farmer learns more or less to compete against his own best efforts, and being far removed from the more violent competition of certain industries he can reflect more upon the long-term designs of the Creator and His wise providence in giving us the soil governed by creative process. We still find in rural life more personalized factors and a tendency to deal with the wholeness of man's personality as well as the wholeness of life and the wholeness of God.

Certain attributes of life among rural people suggest the role they have in helping to develop a more peaceful world.

**Rural people tend to be conservative.** Accustomed to working with the soil, like processes of nature they tend to become less impulsive, and like to ponder well before acting. They like to do their own thinking and dislike being forced into premature or precipitate action. Some may complain about this trait of rural people, but it may be that greater progress would be made in reaching possible solutions to world problems if longer time and more profound deliberations were used.

**Rural people maintain strong family ties and bonds.** It is a truism that the family is basic to a stable society, and since this is true, the attitudes of peace may well be learned and communicated within the family. Democracy would hardly be possible in a country lacking family unity and family stability. Totalitarian powers seek first to destroy the family.

The word "community" has a profound meaning among rural people. To them it is not only a geographic space, but a social community which determines patterns of action to a large degree. The community is a place where attitudes of peace may be developed and it will serve as the laboratory for patterns that may well extend into the larger world.

Again, **the family livelihood is gained in the area where the farmer lives.** This should be a unifying activity. We need so to express the gospel as to make its relevance felt in the daily vocation. Here is where the great battle is being fought. Peace must be made in the quiet isolated places of the world if it is to endure the strain of political tensions at the top level. Rural

people have an opportunity to create an ideal laboratory where the human community at its best can function. The basic importance of the family, the intermediate relationship of the products and the use of resources with a spirit of responsibility creates one of the basic foundations on which any peace must rest.

We do well to cultivate the fellowship of mutual concern that seems natural among rural people. Despite vast technological advances there is still a strong case for "rural fundamentalism" which holds that agriculture is still our basic industry and that the title of world well-being rises and falls with the well-being of the people on the land. In problems of food, fuel and fiber, and the intricate human relationships involved in their production, there is much that may be done toward developing a world point of view. No longer are the problems of food scarcity, famine, pest control, conservation or crop surpluses considered the concern of any one country alone.

We too easily confuse ends and means. We have assumed that to achieve a certain economic level of living is to reach our goal in life. New meaning must be brought into our present secular life. Peace cannot be built on materialism. In our relationships with each other in the use of divinely created resources, we come face to face with the basic questions of stewardship and redemption. We need a philosophy of peace that recognizes more fully man's dependence upon God and the bounties of Nature.



## *The Church and Community Ideals*

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► Our concern here is with the positive contribution which the Church can make to the development of Christian community in the rural places of America. Rather than a criticism of things which may be wrong, we are interested in discovering ways in which the Church can bring Christian ideals and objectives to bear upon the inherent spiritual possibilities in rural communities. The central task of the Church in this regard is to inspire, motivate, and guide its own members that they may bring their Christian influence to bear upon the whole range of life. The overall objective of the Church is to create a common unity in God. Christian ethics, standards, and ideals find their source in Him rather than in secular culture. A community becomes Christian to the degree in which it finds unity in a common loyalty to God.

The term "Church" as used here refers to the company of people drawn into relationship with each other because of their common relationship with God as revealed in Christ. But almost never will an American town-country community be found in which there is a single local church. Sometimes there is lack of agreement among churches as to spiritual and moral standards of character. One may sponsor Boy Scout troops, while another opposes them. Since each church claims to speak for God we must be aware lest there arise relativity of moral standards.

There are several ways in which the Church can assist in elevating the goals and ideals of community life.

**First is the need for self study of the Church's own life** in relation to the community. Outside assistance in such studies is usually helpful, but the process of an objective evaluation by the Church itself can lead to new insights of Christian criteria and constructive action that could be missed where we rely upon outside specialists too far in doing the job.

**A second contribution of the Church is in discovering areas of inter-church concern.** Each church must think of its own membership with a concept not narrowly conceived of its obligation to the larger community. Whenever this does occur, the Church dissipates the force of its life in the community, and



the members often have to proceed with decision making and conduct without influence from the Church. Where this occurs it can hardly be said that there are Christian community ideals.

Again, **the Church is in a unique position to vouchsafe a unity of understanding.** This does not mean that there must be uniformity of agreement. Given general agreement as to ethical standards of Christian conduct, the churches can lead far in being the conscience of the community. But unless there is more common agreement, based upon clear biblical standards, the Church's influence is greatly limited. This is essential too, for without such agreement upon biblical standards many American communities are suffering from a "plurality of consciences."

**An urgent and unfinished task of the Church,** and an area where no other agency can serve so well, is in **helping to give more highly elevated concepts of family life** and a sense of Christian vocation. These are foundation pillars of life in any community and they are often the most neglected. The responsibility of every Christian to witness to Christ through his vocation and the daily relationship of his home is a fundamental aspect of the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers."

**Probably the basic task of the Church is to create a common unity in God,** to bring the will of God to bear upon the total life of all the people of the community. The primary purpose of the Church is not to make the community just a better place to live in; rather it is to bring men and women, boys and girls, into a vital relationship with God in the whole range of their lives. Thus the worship of God is the core of Christian community, and only as the Church within itself has a redeeming experience of God can it become a redeeming influence in the life of its community. The Church, in other words, must be a Christian community in its own worship, fellowship, and program before it can be a transforming force in the life of its sociological community.

## ***Soil Conservation and Land Use***

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### ***Some Moral and Religious Aspects***

*“... for the land is mine; ye  
are strangers and sojourners with me”* LEV. 25:23

► The Bible is replete with laws regarding man's responsibility to God and his neighbor in the use of land, and central facts in our life today give new relevance to conservation and land use. Mass hunger, once dealt with as an emergency like famine, is now with us as a major problem scarcely affected by the first five years of postwar effort. Mounting world population has reduced the crop-land area per person to less than one acre.

Overcrowded people in land-hungry nations are a warning for us to lose no time in working toward those forms of land use that will best serve the long-term needs of our country and our people. We may thus be spared the terrible social and economic costs suffered by some nations today in their frantic efforts to solve their land question with emergency measures. While we recognize the possibilities of increased production and reclamation, the need for conservation and righteous forms of husbandry and land use becomes clear. Let the Church not conform its life to exploitative soil practices, but labor to transform all of life after God's pattern of unity.

It is not possible to include here any complete consideration of this topic, but we shall endeavor to lift out certain of the points developed during the discussion period. Later during the year, members of the Christian Rural Fellowship will develop more complete statements for printing as bulletins.

Land in its broad sense involves the whole of Nature, all natural resources, and not merely the soil or land space alone. There is no accident in the fact that land is placed first in listing the factors of production—Land, Labor, Capital, and Management.

Deep scars of irresponsible exploitation of land may clearly be seen both at home and abroad. Erosion, bad cropping, overgrazing and deforestation can crush the human spirit for those who follow, and must be viewed as evils in the sight of the Creator. The wise and responsible use of land is the corner-

stone of an enduring civilization. Good government and a sound land policy are inseparable.

**Many of our social and economic problems are the result of our failure to work in cooperation with Nature,** as designed by God. Nature deals kindly, but justly, and she can bring well-being, or desolation and impoverishment, to the degree that we accept or neglect the divinely appointed laws of conservation and land use. We must deal with soil as the living thing that it is, a part of God's handiwork. It would be tragic if our generation should become technologically wise and at the same time biologically ignorant.

**Human health may depend more than we realize upon the fertility of soil and the quality of food it can produce.** It would be an error to overlook the fact that turbulent political scenes in the world may be symptoms of a major cause, where the people are pressing for access to more fertile and less depleted soils capable of producing rich protein foods rather than the cheaper carbohydrates.

**Experience in the U.S. leads us to place a high value upon the family type farm as an organizational unit in agriculture.** We have regarded reasonably wide dispersion of land ownership as sound national policy. Yet we take pride in the fact that 85 per cent of our people can reside in towns and cities, while only 15 per cent are needed on farms. Our country is new; changes are taking place rapidly, and the real question may not be how few families can produce our food and fiber, but the *optimum number* of families on the land to serve the best interests of all.

Careful research and assessment of our experience and that of other nations is needed at this point. It would be an error to rely upon economic criteria alone. As a rule, relatively wide distribution of land ownership among the people has proven a safe and desirable course in the history of older countries. Some who departed from that course are now engaged in efforts to restore balance by radical and costly political efforts called "land reform."

Land of itself may not have value but it becomes a dynamic force in our whole culture and national strength as people express through its use their ideals of stewardship, justice,

and concern for their fellow men. If the stability of our democratic state has recently come under question, could it be because we are less agricultural and depending too much upon securities far removed from the land? Our national strength in the last analysis lies in our land. Its conservation and righteous use is a responsibility placed by God upon rural and urban people alike.

### ***Suggested Topics for Research***

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During the discussion periods there were frequent inquiries for more adequate information on:

1. Trends and experience in the dispersion of industry into less congested rural areas.
2. How can social and economic advantages of mechanized farming best serve the needs of the smaller operator?
3. Problems involved in large-scale world distribution of food surpluses.
4. An interpretation of biblical teachings and their relevance to present day factors in land use.
5. Relationship between human nutrition and soil fertility.







